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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 56 (2012) 292 – 297

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (ICTLHE2012) in
conjunction with RCEE & RHed 2012

Continuing Education for Professional Development at *UTMSPACE* - Experience, Development and Trends

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Abstract

As Malaysia is rapidly transforming into a knowledge-based nation, our society has realized the importance of lifelong learning. Thus, continuing education development is needed to accommodate its increasing demand for skilled personnel. To achieve this, *UTMSPACE* of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) inceptioned in 1994, has expanded its professional programmes through the establishment of Professional Development Unit (UPP) in 2004. Among UPP's major functions include event management, and educate individuals with knowledge, skills, and ability in dealing with the challenges of current technology. This paper highlights the learning experience and challenges faced by UPP in managing *UTMSPACE*'s professional development and training programmes. In particular, the strategic and synergize efforts taken both by *UTMSPACE* and UTM towards gaining prestigious brand in continuing education in Malaysia.

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Keywords: Professional Development; Continuing Education; Lifelong Learning; Training Programmes

1. Introduction

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) is Malaysia's premier university in engineering, science and technology and recently achieved research university status. The University is obliged to play a major role in promoting lifelong learning through various continuing education programmes conducted by the School of Professional and Continuing Education or *UTMSPACE* established in 1993. *UTMSPACE* has a vision to become a self-sustaining centre of excellence that promotes tertiary continuing education, as it holds the philosophy that education is a lifelong process and borderless. Therefore, *UTMSPACE* provides a platform for school leavers with

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relevant experience to enhance their self-worth by offering quality tertiary continuing education programmes. To stay in line with the concept of liberal education, *UTMSPACE* holds a mission to explore and expand the opportunities and training for continuing education through quality programmes by flexible means and with the use of optimum resources, via the following objectives;

- to promote quality tertiary education
- to expand and upgrade the quality of education and professionalism
- to organize training programmes to fulfil the requirements of professional bodies
- to promote smart partnerships
- to promote and coordinate all external programmes conducted by UTM
- to optimize the use of resources and physical facilities

UTMSPACE upholds the mission to provide quality continuing education services based on science and technology using operational methods that are flexible and customer-friendly with the motto - “Excellence through continuing education”. This school is managed by a Dean, with the assistance of Deputy Deans, Heads of Units, managers and over 150 support staff. Currently, *UTMSPACE* offers part-time, full-time, franchise and executive programmes at Diploma and Bachelor levels, with the cooperation of over 40 learning centres, franchise colleges and smart partners throughout the country.

The Professional Development Unit, UPP was established in July 2004. UPP is seen as part of an effort by *UTMSPACE* to enhance continuing education by being a “One-Stop Centre” for all activities related to professional development training programmes, such as short courses, professional certificates, workshops, seminars and conferences. In this aspect UPP has conducted over 570 courses since 2004.

2. Professional Development Trends

According to research done by Bersin & Associates, corporate training budgets in the United States increased on average by seven percent in 2006 - the largest increase in five years. Most corporations are investing more in training for three primary reasons:

- a. Economic growth in many regions is putting greater demands on training.
- b. Talent shortages are being felt in all industry sectors and across almost all geographies. Consequently, companies are putting more emphasis on hiring and training new personnel and on training current employees for new roles.
- c. Increased focus on talent management. Corporations are increasingly recognizing that learning and development is part of an integrated talent management process that includes recruiting, performance management, leadership development, and succession planning.

Research done by the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research showed that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its updated World Economic Outlook (WEO) published in November 2008, forecast a global recession in 2009. Its revised projection for 2009 world output growth to 2.2 per cent, down from the 3.0 per cent projected in the October WEO. In November 2008, Malaysia announced a RM 7 billion economic stimulus package to avoid a possible recession in 2009. This stimulus package announced in November 2008 has been allocated mostly to infrastructural projects, which includes; the building of low- and medium-cost houses; the upgrading, repairing and maintenance of police stations and living quarters, and army camps and quarters; minor projects like village roads, community halls and small bridges; public amenities such as roads, schools and hospitals; and the building and upgrading of roads in rural areas, villages, as well as agriculture roads. Therefore, it is indicative that training needs depend on allocation, thus somewhat predetermined by economic growth. However, with the

recession, budgets allocated to training are channelled to other more urgent social needs of the nation and infrastructures.

According to the CEO of the Centre for Continuing Education, The University of Sydney, it is a well-known fact that adult education is an important factor of economic, social and cultural development in all modern societies. This is because it can lead to change and more importantly, our ability to adjust to a changing way of life as we grow older. Thomas Kuhn's in his writing *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), demonstrated that the impetus for significant change most often comes from outside an established field - our comfort zone. So to help forecast or make change in your own life, or to keep pace in your own line of work, you need to pay attention to areas of knowledge other than your own.

Education is an important investment often overlooked during challenging economic times and this may be short-sighted. The strength of any economy rests on its service industries, including training, as well as transportation, trade and construction, entertainment and health services. After all, Jennings Wagoner in his book, *Jefferson and Education*, reminds us of Jefferson's regard for the importance of education as "... the first defence of the nation" (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 2004). Undoubtedly there is a good economic life for those who upgrade their knowledge, skills, have university degrees and have access to careers and employment immediately after graduation. Nonetheless, their future lies in roles where they will receive specific training and have opportunities for continuing education.

3. Professional Development Packages

As Malaysia is rapidly transforming itself into a knowledge-based nation, our society has realized the importance of lifelong learning as part of their lives. With accelerating globalization, continuing education development is urgently needed to accommodate its increasing demand for skilled personnel. The Professional Development Programmes have been designed to incorporate current workplace practices as well as to taking a global perspective. These programmes take several forms specifically short courses, in-house training, workshops, certificate courses or seminars and conferences. The method of delivery of this type of training includes the traditional types of classroom lectures, laboratories, site visits, games, simulations and hands-on, and presentations. Their contents and duration can be tailored to suit the particular needs of specific profession or organization. The emergence of new technologies has also led to rapid improvements in speed, efficiency and cost-effectiveness in virtually every aspect of business. One has to keep abreast of these changes and update knowledge and skills accordingly to enable healthy competition in the global marketplace.

3.1. UPP's Experience as an Event Manager

UTMSPACE, is a certified Class A training provider by Malaysia's PSMB (Human Resources Development Fund, HRDF) and Manpower Planning Unit, MAMPU. In this aspect, UPP has its own marketing and promotion plans and strategies to promote lifelong learning through their training allocation. Promotion is done through conventional methods such as advertisements in major local newspapers and brochures, alongside other promotion activities such as industrial visits, roadshows, education exhibition, open counter, emails and online via website *UTMSPACE*.

In event management, *UTMSPACE* offers a comprehensive service and expertise from industries to ensure the successful implementation of events, be it local or international seminars, conferences and short courses. Good infrastructures play a vital role in the success of events organized. The Information & Computer Technology Unit of *UTMSPACE* has developed a user friendly portal for each seminars/conferences managed by UPP. For

instance, the Office of International Affairs, UTM had appointed UPP to manage the University Presidents Forum for two consecutive years; i.e. 2009 and 2010. This annual University Presidents Forum generally held in March each year in conjunction with the university's convocation ceremony. There were more than 20 universities participated in this year's forum.

To enhance the promotion of the professional and short courses, a Directory of Professional Development Programme was launched in 2004. This directory contains a list of 350 short courses encompassing various fields and expertise including built environment, chemical engineering, civil engineering, computing & information technology, education, electrical engineering, geo-information science, management development, mechanical engineering, personal development, quality management, science, ready to be offered by *UTMSPACE* in co-operation with all faculties at UTM. The facilitators/trainers of the programmes conducted are among lecturers and distinguished speakers who are experts in their areas.

3.2. International Outreach

UTMSPACE has new focus on smart partnerships with external organisations. In 2009, UPP alone has developed smart partnerships with 5 organisations in order to broaden the promotion of the professional development programmes. *UTMSPACE* held promotional activities at various countries, for example:-

- Indonesia
- Singapore
- Thailand
- Brunei
- Vietnam
- Korea
- China

The main objective is to promote UTM as a centre of academic and technological excellence to neighbouring countries. *UTMSPACE* also held a benchmarking visit to HKUSPACE which is the business arm of Hong Kong University, whose focuses on contributing towards continuing education in Hong Kong. The Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia has appointed *UTMSPACE* to manage Malaysian delegates from 12 Public/Private Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA/S) to participate in NAFSA2010 Annual Conference and Expo which was held in Kansas City Convention Centre, America.

4. Sustaining Quality of Programmes

Quality is vital to the survival of continuing education and professional development programmes and will probably be the biggest issue facing higher education in years to come as institutions are now competing globally. At *UTMSPACE*, there are three quality criteria that must be addressed in its operation, namely, fast response, quality product and market driven or customer-focused, qualities measured through customer satisfaction. It is therefore essential for these programmes to be monitored qualitatively and quantitatively. Measures to ensure quality must be considered early in the design stage. That includes taking into account factors such as knowing the target participants, venue, course contents, CPD/CCD points and the potential enhancement skills acquired as a result of participation in the programmes, maintaining the technical infrastructure and support, confident and committed lecturers, sustaining administrative commitment, and evaluation for continuous improvement.

UTMSPACE is committed in carrying out quality management to guarantee the delivery of its quality product and services to customers. UPP alone has 7 Standard Operating Procedures that need to be fulfilled from the planning, managing, and report generation. Client charter of *UTMSPACE* specifies that Participants of Professional Development Programmes will be provided with;

- a. A programme that fulfils the various skills needed by the industries and service sectors, and
- b. A team of experienced lecturers and professionals in their field of specialization.
- c. To measure customer satisfaction, UPP gets the feedback on the programmes conducted through evaluation forms distributed to all participants. Among areas evaluated are the course contents, facilitators/trainers and the management of the programmes. *UTMSPACE* has targeted customer satisfaction level (KPI) of 80%. In this aspect, customer satisfaction index achievement shows an increase from 81.78% in 2008 to 83% in 2009.

According to the *UTMSPACE* 2009 Annual Reports, the participation rate in professional programmes, that is short courses, workshops, seminars and conferences sees an increase of 226%, from 1325 in 2005 to 4325 in 2009. Table 1 shows UPP's overall achievement in terms of participation. As of 2009, the total number of participants is 17,705. UPP has successfully conducted a total of 576 programmes since 2004.

Table 1. Professional development programmes (2004 – 2009), by participation

| No | Programmes | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | TOTAL |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1 | Short Courses | 296 | 428 | 1186 | 1640 | 1012 | 793 | 5355 |
| 2 | In-House | 0 | 59 | 650 | 1035 | 2346 | 1874 | 5964 |
| 3 | Contract/Smartpartnership | 0 | 344 | 619 | 124 | 94 | 57 | 1238 |
| 4 | Professional Certificates | 0 | 76 | 131 | 41 | 132 | 234 | 614 |
| 5 | Seminars/Conferences | 145 | 418 | 527 | 633 | 1444 | 1367 | 4534 |
| TOTAL | | 441 | 1325 | 3113 | 3473 | 5028 | 4325 | 17705 |

The professional development programmes are classified into five (5) under various categories of technical and soft skill programmes, as shown in Table 2. In terms of revenue, UPP contributed 12% of the total revenue for *UTMSPACE*.

Table 2. Professional development programmes (2004 – 2009), by programmes

| No | Programmes | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | TOTAL |
|--------------|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1 | Short Courses | 12 | 17 | 41 | 78 | 48 | 51 | 247 |
| 2 | In-House | 0 | 5 | 21 | 36 | 83 | 60 | 205 |
| 3 | Contract/Smartpartnership | 0 | 17 | 28 | 6 | 8 | 4 | 63 |
| 4 | Professional Certificates | 0 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 22 |
| 5 | Seminars/Conferences | 1 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 11 | 13 | 39 |
| TOTAL | | 13 | 46 | 98 | 128 | 154 | 137 | 576 |

5. Conclusion

UTMSPACE has become a home brand and very synonymous in continuing education. Statistics indicate that professional training and development is still relevant to current human capital requirements. This also reflects the creative, strategic and synergetic efforts taken by *UTMSPACE* in gaining a prestigious brand as a continuing education provider in Malaysia.

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